

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE C13

THE WASHINGTON POST
28 September 1981

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CIA Renegade, U.S. Officials Meet in Rome

A bizarre rendezvous occurred in Rome last July. The top U.S. intelligence official there met with a renegade ex-CIA agent to discuss the possible assassination of Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi.

The former spy was Edwin Wilson, a fugitive from American justice. He jumped bail one year ago after being indicted on charges of illegally furnishing explosives to Libya and conspiring to kill a Qaddafi political rival. He sought refuge in Tripoli, and has been living there under Qaddafi's protection.

Among the U.S. officials who met with Wilson July 8-10 was E. Lawrence Barcella Jr., the assistant U.S. attorney who is prosecuting the Wilson case. Another was the CIA station chief in Rome, whose name I have agreed not to disclose.

The Justice Department attorney and the CIA spymaster had different reasons for wanting to talk with Wilson. Barcella was hoping to persuade Wilson to return voluntarily to the United States to clean up the government's case against him and others, either through a plea bargain or an agreement to tell what he knew. The CIA apparently hoped to enlist

the cooperation of Wilson or one of his mercenaries in an assassination plot against Qaddafi, three intelligence sources told my associates Dale Van Atta and Ron McRae.

One reliable source said the peculiar meeting of Barcella and his quarry was initiated by Wilson's attorney after visiting the fugitive in Tripoli. Barcella's emergency travel request was rushed through the Justice Department bureaucracy in three days.

Meanwhile, CIA officials had been hatching a typically bizarre plan to eliminate Qaddafi. Their chosen instrument was a lethal poison that was to be injected into the desert dictator by means of a tiny dart disguised as one of the black flies that infest Libya.

The two agencies' hopes of using Wilson culminated in the Rome meetings. Barcella's role was important: He arranged for the international arrest warrant against Wilson to be lifted, temporarily and only for Italy. If the fugitive had tried to go almost anywhere else, he would have been pounced upon and extradited to the United States.

After Wilson arrived in Rome, his passport was taken from him and stamped with an expiration date of Aug. 1. This meant he was encouraged to return to the United States by that time to face federal charges—but he boasted he would use one of his dozen or more false passports to go elsewhere.

According to my sources, Barcella and at least four other U.S. officials huddled in London to plan their moves. One of the officials was an assistant to Barcella, another was an FBI agent and a third was an agent of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. Members of this entourage also traveled to Scotland and Switzerland to check leads in the case before going on to Rome.

When asked if he had been "carrying water" for the CIA, Barcella refused comment. In fact, he declined even to acknowledge meeting with Wilson.

At any rate, the meetings reportedly lasted for two days during the second week of July. My sources say the CIA "monitored" the meetings—a spook word that could mean anything from secretly bugging the meetings to having a representative present. It was the CIA station chief's job—not Barcella's—to raise the question of assassination.

There is at least a possibility that the government, despairing of snaring Wilson any other way, was trying to get him either liquidated by Qaddafi or smoked out of his Libyan refuge by compromising him with an assassination discussion. Wilson was obviously aware of this possibility: he put out a story that the Rome meetings were arranged to discuss his offer to blow the whistle on two Cuban fugitives wanted for the 1976 assassination of Chilean exile Orlando Letelier.